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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Corner Liquor Store: Rethinking Toxicity in the Black Metropolis

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Abstract
Liquor stores have been repeatedly shown to be disproportionately prevalent in Black neighborhoods and therefore constitute a disproportionate health risk. This paper examines the ways in which liquor stores jeopardize Black lives through social and material conditions that are broader than health risk. Embodying and perpetuating dysfunctional markets, liquor stores relegate Black consumers to an overabundance of inexpensive and potent alcoholic beverages sold from heavily securitized storefronts and provoke conflicted and oppositional relationships. Liquor stores exist in a state of antibiosis with Black communities, an antagonistic relationship in which liquor stores gain but communities are adversely affected.

Keywords Liquor/alcohol · African American/black · Stores · Neighborhoods · Inequality

Introduction

Martin Sladek, a Czech clerk at Paretti's Liquor Store, adjacent to New York City's Queensbridge housing projects, noted with a grin that when drug dealers came to the store, they bought Hennessy, while drug users bought Georgi, an inexpensive vodka. His attitude was one of amusement at "presiding over a grand comedy." At Paretti's, consumers with but one dollar to spend could procure nips of alcohol, small servings common on airplanes and in hotel mini-bars. Besides nips, customers bought bottles of Wild Irish Rose, a low-quality, high-alcohol content fortified wine, which some drank at a gulp during breaks from work. Others arrived first thing in the morning in search of a shot that would quell their shaking. All of these transactions were conducted through one-inch bulletproof glass. Sladek's grand comedy, then, was the suffering to which one could bear witness at a liquor store in one of the city's poorest communities (Angelos 2007). In Chicago, MW Food and Liquors engaged in similar trade, selling inexpensive bottles to alcoholic and often homeless individuals who

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frequented the establishment multiple times per day and for whom it was apparently unremarkable to pass out face-first to the asphalt (Fitch 2000).

Where Sladek and the staff at Paretti's are indifferent to, or even amused by their furthering disorder and morbidity, other store owners dislike the liquor business, recoiling at their role in causing detriment to communities. The owner of Jean's Liquor in Los Angeles explained, "I do not feel comfortable with selling liquor at all. Particularly, when my regular customers are completely drunk, and come to my store, I feel very bad. Sometimes I receive a card announcing their death, then I feel the worst" (Park 1995/1996, 15). Still, owners like these do not feel quite badly enough to close their doors. Liquor stores in Black neighborhoods (corner liquor stores) enjoy fertile environments in areas otherwise bereft of retail, clustering with other indicia of urban privation: check cashing outlets, fast food restaurants, and "sleazy businesses" (Wacquant 2008; Kwate and Loh 2016; Ford and Beveridge 2004). Their prevalence cannot be explained by socioeconomic metrics, exceeding what would be expected by any population characteristic. Neither is their prevalence explained by demand; the patrons profiled in journalistic coverage of stores like Paretti's are not representative of African American communities at large, and liquor stores are consistently resisted by the neighborhoods in which they are most numerous.

The disproportionate density of liquor stores with which Black communities have been saddled is an inequity extensively documented by public health researchers. Though public attention to racial patterning in liquor store density has waned since the 1990s, municipal-level and national data both convincingly demonstrate that in the United States, liquor stores are most numerous in neighborhoods with greater percentages of Black residents. In Baltimore, off-premise per capita licenses were positively associated with the percentage of Black residents, after accounting for income (LaVeist and Wallace 2000). In Chicago, liquor stores were most prevalent and also highly spatially clustered in Black neighborhoods (Kwate and Loh 2016). Also in the Chicago area, predominantly Black zip codes in Cook County had exposure rates ranging from twice to six times as high as White counterparts, depending on the metric employed (Maxwell and Immergluck 1997). Finally, national data support the findings from city studies. At the zip code level, Black residents face more liquor stores than Whites whether liquor stores are counted per one hundred roadway miles or per one thousand residents, particularly in low-income areas (Romley et al. 2007). Continuous mapping of liquor store density across the entire country found the same associations with blackness as those documented in individual cities, patterns not driven by demand (Berke et al. 2010).

Yet, a relative lack of interpretation about the racial meanings and consequences of corner liquor stores remains. Existing work is primarily motivated by the critical public health threat that liquor stores pose as sites of toxicity where the goods sold produce physical and social harm. Thus, studies of corner liquor stores center alcohol consumption and related health risks. Living in predominantly Black neighborhoods is associated with greater distilled spirits use and negative consequences (Jones-Webb and Karriker-Jaffe 2013), suggesting a link to alcohol availability. Indeed, liquor store density has been shown to triple the odds of at-risk drinking among adults (Theall et al. 2011) and are associated with sexually transmitted disease (Cohen et al. 2006), violent crime (Schofield and Denson 2013; Toomey et al. 2012), pedestrian injuries (Nesoff et al. 2018) and likelihood of emergency room visits for intimate partner violence (Cunradi et al. 2012). These are undeniably urgent concerns. But corner liquor stores exert systematic pressures on communities of which health outcomes are but one. They induce a cascade of socioeconomic and social stressors and perpetuate institutional policies and practices that subordinate Black people. They have a profound and capacious reach in Black life.

I argue that corner liquor store toxicity inheres in their state of antibiosis—an antagonistic relationship between two organisms, in which one is adversely affected—with Black neighborhoods. Where retail in White neighborhoods benefits merchants (in sales), shoppers (in access to goods and services, whether for necessity or leisure), and often the community (in lending prestige and amenities that heighten residential desirability and property values), corner liquor stores operate to the benefit of the merchant but to the detriment of the patrons and the community. These outlets extract resources while introducing and perpetuating dysfunction in retail markets and community life. Liquor stores therefore concretize, at street level, a social system that relegates Black people to the bottom of the social order. For that reason, corner liquor stores are toxic not only because there are too many of them but also because they function as a site for the (re)enactment of projects of Black domination, telling us, in their occupation of urban space, how "racism takes place" (Lipsitz 2011). Racism is the root of the antibiotic relationship liquor stores maintain with their host neighborhoods.

Booze, booze, booze: navigating the terrain of alcohol saturation

To make liquor stores coextensive with Black space is to create a kind of spatial interpretability of race in which Black neighborhoods are cast as reservations of vice. This is hardly a new construction. Red-light districts in the late nineteenth century were often spatial congregations of mixed-race crowds, but after racist White mob violence ("race riots") gripped cities in the early 1900s, social reformers sought to harden spatial and racial divisions. Seeing Black people as immoral and culturally inferior and seeking to curb disorder, reformers fostered the quarantining of vice to Black neighborhoods (Muhammad 2010; Keire 2010). States and cities enacted varied laws to prevent racial mixing within establishments serving liquor. For example, in New York City, the Committee of Fourteen required Black saloon owners to swear that they would not serve Black/White interracial couples. Importantly, some laws forbade Black people from holding liquor licenses, consolidating ownership of liquor licenses to powerful White men (Keire 2010). The long term consequences of these laws is that liquor stores in Black communities have long been White owned (until changing ethnic hands, as in the case of Korean merchants in Los Angeles (Park 1995/1996), creating a flashpoint for suspicion and protest.

In the 1980s and 1990s, journalists in several major cities reported on Black communities besieged with liquor. In Washington, D.C., community activist Jim Berry asserted that his Shaw neighborhood was inundated with alcohol. His own residence sat around the corner from four liquor stores, down the street from seven more, and a block away from an additional five. To wit: "Everywhere you turn, its booze, booze, booze" (Sanchez 1994). A bifurcated alcohol environment was plainly etched in the metropolitan area's apartheid geographies of city versus suburb. The Chocolate City counted some eight hundred businesses licensed to sell liquor, including stores, bars and restaurants, whereas the Vanilla Suburbs (Montgomery County)—home to more than 200,000 additional residents over 450 greater square miles of land area—bore only two-hundred fifty establishments (Sanchez 1994).

Chicago's North Lawndale was similarly affected with a lone supermarket, bank, and hospital but at least one hundred liquor stores. On the South Side, Woodlawn resembled a "lunar landscape" of commerce but nevertheless sustained several liquor stores. In the words of a neighborhood shopkeeper: "It's very unfortunate but it seems that all that really grows here is liquor stores" (Wacquant 2008, 53). For this shopkeeper, liquor stores grew like weeds and both academic research and journalistic accounts represent them as an invasive species. Social

scientists in the 1990s observed that South Central Los Angeles stood apart in its overabundance of alcohol, accommodating "an astonishing number of liquor stores." In one estimate, there were 682 licenses within forty square miles, or seventeen stores per square mile, compared to 1.6 elsewhere in the county; a map of the area depicted as many as four to five outlets per block (Sonenshein 1996). The liquor stores in South Central were rooted in streetscapes plagued by a monotonous and severely restricted set of retail stores and other institutions; the few businesses that did not purvey alcoholic beverages were often drug fronts (Park 1995/1996).

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Black New Orleans residents were much more likely than White counterparts to express a preference for rebuilt neighborhoods that contained no liquor stores (Hong and Farley 2008). More recently, in an October 2016 op-ed for the *Chicago Sun-Times* Laura Washington explained, "I grew up all over the South Side, moving from Oakwood to Bronzeville to Washington Park to Park Manor to South Shore. My mother was always seeking a little better apartment, a little safer neighborhood. Mama had one iron clad rule: She would not rent an apartment near a liquor store…In our neighborhoods, it seems there's one on every corner. Today, swaths of the city's South and West sides remain economic disaster areas. We need sit-down restaurants, boutiques, healthy grocery stores. We get chicken shacks, currency exchanges — and liquor stores." Washington's critique illustrates the ubiquity of corner liquor stores, the mismatch between their prevalence and community demand, and their insidious penetration into the routine decisions Black folks must make in navigating city life. When liquor stores factor into urban planning goals and individual housing choices, their toxicity clearly extends beyond public health.

To be sure, African Americans do purchase and consume alcoholic beverages, and existing liquor stores meet this need for individuals who are so inclined. Yet, Black Americans have among the lowest rates of drinking in the country, certainly in comparison to White counterparts. According to the 2016 National Health Insurance Survey, 57.6% of White and 43.6% of Black adults aged eighteen and over were current regular drinkers—someone who had consumed at least twelve drinks in his or her lifetime and had at least twelve drinks in the past year. On the other hand, 28.3% of Black but only 16.7% of White Americans were lifetime abstainers (National Center for Health Statistics 2016). These data would make White neighborhoods the logical repository for corner liquor stores, contrary to existing prevalence.

Texts from the humanities enliven quantitative studies of alcohol environments. Isabel Wilkerson's (2010) historical narratives of participants in the Great Migration bring into focus how quickly liquor stores connect to Black spaces. Ida Mae Gladney and her family saw that when White Chicagoans fled the coming of Black neighbors to South Shore in the late 1960s, "the turnover was sudden and complete and so destabilizing that it even extended to the stores on Seventy-fifth Street…the ice cream parlor closed. The five-and-dime shut down. The Walgreens on the corner became a liquor store" (396). It is telling that Walgreens departed in the face of new Black neighbors. Either the company perceived Black residents to have no use for a drugstore or calculated that it had no use for Black customers. In either case, the liquor store owners, attracted by blackness, planted a flag where other retailers refused to tread.

Problematic and quotidian in equal measure, corner liquor stores betray their reach in Black life by showing up in works of fine art. Romare Bearden's 1971 mixed-media work, *The Block,* showcases a typical Harlem streetscape, and among the included neighborhood institutions is a liquor store. In *Rebuild South Central Without Liquor Stores,* Mark Bradford transforms a public poster critiquing the presence of liquor stores in the aftermath of the 1992 unrest in Los Angeles. Kerry James Marshall's painting, *7 am Sunday Morning,* depicts a scene in his neighborhood—Bronzeville, the heart of Chicago's historic Black Belt. Marshall

shows us a streetscape centered around Rothschild Liquors, a real store that exists at the corner of East 39th Street and Indiana Avenue. In the painting, an unadorned banner tacked to the storefront shouts in capital letters, "LIQUORS." The front door is unmarked and windowless, a slab of metal lacking even an address and secured shut with padlocked bars. Four men have gathered around the store's perimeter, one of whom stands in the parking lot in an unstable pose. In marked contrast to the stark and unyielding liquor store, the men's clothes strike the viewer as plush and inviting, their dark shoes resembling slippers. Marshall seems to highlight in this juxtaposition the damage this store will do to vulnerable bodies.

Liquor stores also appear in feature films. Furious Styles, Tre's father in *Boyz N The Hood*, asks a group of neighborhood residents why there is a liquor store on every corner and then answers his own question: "Why? They want us to kill ourselves." For alcoholic beverage markets to function, at least some Black consumers must remain alive—killing them all would leave no consumer base. But Furious has a point. Liquor stores do increase the risk of disease, death, and disorder, and a healthy skepticism is warranted about whether these are unintended consequences. These are businesses with low turnover (Kwate and Loh 2016) in part because alcoholic beverages do not get stale (St. Jean 2007), and this prevalence and longevity coupled with the abdication of the state suggest for many an invidious intention to hasten Black mortality. How else ought we interpret the impact of corner liquor stores?

Antibiosis in action

Liquor stores exemplify an antibiotic relationship with Black communities because as they take in financial gains, they produce and benefit from retail dysfunction, provoke health problems and social discord, and operate within an aesthetic context that mars the streetscape and signals perceived deviance. These outcomes are not merely byproducts of corner liquor store operations; they are constitutive of it. Corner liquor stores thrive while the surrounding community with which it interacts suffers, the definition of antibiosis.

Dysfunctional retail operations

Liquor stores proliferate in distorted retail conditions. Because retail from a variety of sectors effectively redlines Black neighborhoods (Kwate et al. 2013), it leaves a void that is filled by liquor. Thus, the preponderance of corner liquor stores links directly to deeply embedded retail market inequities. Competing tensions often undergird alcohol outlets. Like many stores in Black neighborhoods, they sit at an uncomfortable nexus of occupying a shady retail context and offering goods that are otherwise unavailable in Black space. For example, liquor stores are often outlets for food, even if limited in selection and inflated in price, and they may provide services lost to institutional desertification such as banking and credit (Park 1995/1996; Sonenshein 1996; Thomas and Fegelman 1997). Moreover, liquor stores have served as important sites for sociability in a context where public and private divestment has left communities lacking in establishments that would otherwise gather people. At Save Most Liquor, Wiley Green, a retired truck driver, used the store's sidewalk space as "his turf, his social club for 36 years" (Thomas and Fegelman 1997). Jelly's Tavern, a liquor store and adjacent barroom on Chicago's South Side, was a bit more discriminating in who could linger at the store, forbidding the consumption of "cheap wine," but the store forged close-knit relationships among Black male patrons (Anderson 2003). As I will describe, the *de facto* social spaces in liquor stores foment community discord.

Liquor stores also distort neighborhood retail conditions. A primary assumption underlying the American marketplace is that consumers are free to purchase or reject goods and services in accordance with their preferences and that retailers must compete with each other to innovate and respond to the vagaries of consumer demand. Liquor stores upend these assumptions through the receipt of supports that operate outside of standard competitive forces. In the face of difficulties meeting the bottom line, liquor stores enjoy such supports from the industry as having their rent paid or the acceptance of penalty-free late payments on inventory (Maxwell and Immergluck 1997). Invisible subsidies from the industry are dangerous not only because they prop up stores and protect them from market conditions but also because community members may wrongly interpret business persistence as a measure of consumer preferences. Hundreds of liquor stores operating in close spatial proximity, especially with sales that rely on inexpensive products, may suggest to neighbors a high demand for alcohol and perhaps alcohol dependence. In other words, residents may infer that the problem is one of consumer choice and that problematic behaviors and mores drive store prevalence (Sanchez 1994).

The impersonal forces of supply and demand that permeate American ideas about the marketplace are not lost on liquor store operators. In Oakland, one owner asserted, “If you want bananas every day and say, `I want bananas,' I will bring bananas. But if you come in and ask for half pint of liquor or a can of malt liquor, I have to provide you that service. I'm obligated because you're not going to come back if I don't have that product. So you dictate what I sell” (Wiederholt 2005). Liquor store owners often center the fetishization of individual responsibility that characterizes American cultural thought. According to one merchant in South Central, the onus is on residents to control their own drinking: “It is a commonsensical thing that any conscious human being should know how to control one’s alcohol consumption” (Park 1995/1996). In fact, these stores’ longevity relies precisely on the repeat business of customers who cannot control their consumption and who are addicted. As noted at the outset, stores like Paretti’s serve a clientele who begins making purchases first thing in the morning.

Liquor stores that are entrenched further destabilize retail corridors over the long term. Maxwell and Immergluck (1997) mark out a complex set of feedback loops that perpetuate an oversaturation of alcohol in urban communities. Once germinated, liquor stores flourish and spread because they deter other retailers and developers put off by “alcohol blight.” Liquor stores impart an air of disrepute to neighborhoods in economic decline, branding them as beyond redemption. Retail becomes anemic as a result, further undermining community reputation, which leads to more liquor stores. As these outlets become the dominant neighborhood institution, social problems fester, prompting the departure of additional businesses, and depreciation of land costs. This in turn makes the community more attractive to marginal users, perpetuating the cycle (Maxwell and Immergluck 1997).

The Cosmopolitan Chamber of Commerce, an interracial business group founded in Chicago in 1933 (first as the Chicago Negro Chamber of Commerce), articulated this very process in 1960. Deliberating how best to stem the flight of businesses from South Side communities, members assessed that, "As Chicago neighborhoods change racially many property owners, having been properly brainwashed by race-baiting bigots and unscrupulous real estate operators out to make a 'fast buck' sell their holdings at a tremendous loss to syndicates and flee to other communities, frequently the suburbs. Many businessmen also become panicky and flee, leaving empty stores." At least thirty vacancies overran less than a mile stretch of 79th Street, and the Chamber argued that empty stores discouraged new businesses and fostered "lower type" businesses to take root, welcomed by landlords desperate for revenue (Chicago Defender 1960).

In such a scenario, when liquor stores take up a mantle forgone by other retailers, it implies that they benefit from a climate of privation and abandonment. If so, an additional reciprocal loop of disorder is likely to ensue: liquor stores that generate abandoned stores and decaying buildings create visual cues of disorder, inducing the state to explicitly shift resources away from communities. When those resources include code and ordinance monitoring and sanction, additional disorder is produced as the landscape falls into disrepair. Neighborhood disorder is read by at least some young men who sell illegal drugs as an indication of state indifference rather than resident apathy, as the broken windows theory holds. One respondent suggested that, "this is a place that the city does not care about what happens for now." What's more, he believed that this state neglect foretold "many people who want to ease their pains of a depressing life with no jobs and lots of problems…they will medicate themselves to deal with the pain" (St. Jean 2007). If urban decay evokes self-medicating with illegal drugs, alcohol is a legal and readily available drug. Ideally positioned as a dispensary to remediate a deficit of resources and the care and attention of the state, corner liquor stores are both pathogen and salve.

Dysfunctional merchandise

As salve, the least expensive, highest potency beverages have often been the coin of the realm. Corner liquor stores are home to products unambiguously meant for intoxication. As a result, they trigger assortative mixing mechanisms that attract drinkers with a preference for inexpensive high-alcohol content drinks (Bluthenthal et al. 2008). Black consumption has always been seen by decision makers as marginal and deviant, excluded from certain consumerist aspects of the accouterments of the American dream (White 2007). The merchandise at corner liquor stores reflects this view, characterized by alcoholic beverages that companies refrain from marketing to affluent Whites. This merchandise is central to perceptions of liquor stores as paradigmatic of social disintegration, and their abeyance as a sign of urban renaissance. In 1964, observers of the changes wrought by Chicago's urban renewal noted that whereas local liquor stores previously stocked half-pint bottles of "cheap whiskey," they had begun to do brisk business in imported wines (Beadle 1967). The liquor store had not gone anywhere, but the community enjoyed an immediate boost in reputation simply by selling imported wines that bolstered the store's status and acceptability.

Corner liquor stores traffic in beverages that, like those in apartheid South Africa, are "cheap if not palatable" (Mager 2004). In so doing, they stratify Black consumers to the least desirable segments of the market for alcoholic beverages. Here antibiosis inheres in the reputational harm done to Black neighbors and in the greater health risks that stem from consumption of these potent drinks. Two types of alcoholic beverages are particularly noteworthy for their low price, high alcohol content, and poor taste: malt liquor and fortified wines. Malt liquor has long been aggressively marketed to Black men, particularly those who are young, poor, or both. Empirical study shows that greater malt liquor shelf space is positively correlated with percent Black and inversely associated with socioeconomic conditions. As well, malt liquor is cheaper in areas with more Black residents (Bluthenthal et al. 2008). Forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor contain as much alcohol as a six-pack of beer and have long been the scourge of Black communities. In response to community protest, some cities have enacted restrictions on their sales, resulting in modest declines in several crimes (McKee et al. 2017). Malt liquor is primarily consumed as a single serving—particularly because an already marginal taste profile declines precipitously when the beverage is no longer cold. One

journalist recounted his first encounter with malt liquor (specifically Olde English 800) thusly: "I'm not saying I'd rather drink metal polish thinned with paint remover, but this stuff is disgusting. To simulate aftertaste, try sucking on a dine [sic] for about half an hour." Following Olde English with a Colt 45, he at least found this brand "drinkable" but could find nothing positive to say about it otherwise (Finch 1987).

These poor reviews of malt liquor cannot be attributed to the journalist's lack of experience with the beverage—even regular drinkers rate malt liquor negatively. In 1979, concerned with falling market share of malt liquor in the Black community, Schlitz contracted with an African American marketing firm to conduct qualitative interviews with current and prior urban Black male drinkers aged eighteen to twenty-four and twenty-four to thirty-five who worked blue collar jobs or were unemployed and who had switched to another malt liquor brand or to other drinks altogether. Interviewees from Atlanta, Los Angeles, and Chicago expressed myriad negative evaluations of "The Bull." It had a bad, "nasty," and harsh lingering taste reminiscent of charcoal; it was bitter, acidic, and chemical in formulation; it was too strong and caused headaches, hangovers, and erratic and aggressive behavior; it was too filling, too foamy, too thick, and too sweet; it made them sick, bloated, caused excessive sweating and urination; and it got drinkers too high (ViewPoint). The last was perhaps both an advantage and disadvantage, given that malt liquor's purpose is to produce an inexpensive high, which respondents acknowledged and appreciated.

Fortified wines have also come in for voluntary regulation by some store owners in Los Angeles (Park 1995/1996) and prohibited for sales at certain outlets in Minneapolis, following citizen complaints (McKee et al. 2017). Some fortified wines are made from table, rather than wine grapes, processed in a manner that maximizes profit and minimizes quality, and mixed with citrus spirits for higher alcohol by volume (e.g., Wild Irish Rose). Others are not made from grapes at all but are "citrus wine" (e.g., Thunderbird). Homeless alcoholics are frequent consumers, a fact the industry recognizes and profits from, but disavows (Fitch 2000). Like malt liquor, regular consumers of fortified wines, particularly MD 20/20 and Richard's Wild Irish Rose, perceive the major benefits of these beverages to be their high potency. They are a cheap, quick way to get drunk, and respondents in marketing focus groups in the 1980s stressed product cheapness—both price and ingredient quality—while noting that these drinks simply did not taste good. Making them palatable often required mixing the wines with soda or other soft drinks. None who drank it held any pretense about the quality or purpose of the drinks. As respondents explained, "This is the poor man's high"; "I don't even buy for the taste—it's too sweet. I buy for the effect. It kills me." "It's the quickest way to get licked." "That MD is strictly for getting crushed" ("A Qualitative Exploration of Consumer Attitudes Toward Fortified Wines Prepared for The Bloom Agency"). Popular discourse categorizes these drinks as "bum wines" or drinks for "winos," and those who consume them do so fully aware of the social stratum to which their behavior relegates them. Fine wines and spirits are targeted to the affluent, domestic beers are comfortably consumed by the middle class, and fortified wines are slated for the poor and deviant.

In the early to mid-1960s, Wild Irish Rose was marketed to affluent African Americans, deploying campaigns meant to position the drink as one at home among African American elites. A 1964 *Ebony* ad suggested that it could be "poured with pride." Quite in contrast, by 1988, the maker of Canadaigua Wines stated that it sold 60-75% of Wild Irish Rose "in primarily Black, inner-city markets" and described consumers as "not super-sophisticated," low income men. Industry commentators asserted that Wild Irish Rose and those of its ilk were "dollar-a-pint street wines made with cheap ingredients and fortified with alcohol to deliver the

biggest bang for the buck" (Freedman 1988). Today, laypersons make YouTube video reviews of "bum wines" in which they consistently decry the aroma as reminiscent of gasoline or other industrial products and the taste as cloyingly sweet and caustic in equal measure.

Dysfunctional aesthetics

The aesthetics of corner store liquor reify their place in a dysfunctional market and are an unsparing visual embodiment of antibiosis. Customers who must cross a threshold outfitted as if for warfare and conduct their transactions through bulletproof partitions are told that the store exists to extract money from a dangerous if not deadly lot. Scholars have described these aesthetics in Baltimore as "behind-the-glass corner stores," where Plexiglas demarcates customer and cashier territories (Furr-Holden 2016). In 2017, the Philadelphia city council voted to require "beer deli" and other corner store operators to remove bulletproof glass from the interior design, arguing that these features were an indignity (Shaw 2017).

Consider Peacock Liquors in Northeast Washington, D.C. (Fig. 1). The exterior reimagines and extends the notion of "behind-the-glass" counter service to the entire building. From a distance, absent the identifying signage, the building would appear to be a warehouse, small manufacturing plant or a purposefully covert, highly securitized use. That the building and grounds are festooned with markers of the store's true purpose only highlights the severity of the façade by drawing attention to the structure's otherwise blank barriers. Three of the four signs repeat the name; the eight-sheet poster affixed to the blank brick wall ("Welcome to PEACOCK LIQUORS Open Sundays 10am – Midnight) is an outdoor media format that normally contains point-of-purchase advertising, but in this case the void reveals advertisers' loss for words. The fourth sign, an enormous arrow pointed at the front door, clarifies the point of entry (and retreat, once inside) through an otherwise impenetrable metal meshwork. The severe and austere frontage rejects any of the architectural elements that would engage patrons on equal terms with store management. Instead, it advances a carceral aesthetic that suggests less neighborhood store than prison commissary.

The carceral corner liquor store denies the possibility of patrons buying products that are pleasurably consumed, especially as part of a gathering of loved ones. Instead, architecture like

Fig. 1 Peacock Liquor Store, 1625 New York Ave. NE, Washington, D.C. Photo taken September 18, 2017, by author

Peacock's suggests store shelves where customers may be as likely to find beer as PVC pipe, shoe innersoles, or car batteries. The architecture is at once inert and threatening, and in parallel process, the store's products are shunted to the realm of utilitarian means to an end. The aesthetics help to define the merchandise within: products meant to deaden the senses rather than enliven them, to be swallowed like medicine without the pretense of savory qualities. Heavily fortified and featureless aesthetics announce corner stores as repositories for alcoholic beverages meant "strictly for getting crushed."

Encasing corner liquor stores behind bars, barriers, gates, grates, and other surfaces and devices meant to repel aggressive forays by Black bodies dates at least to the late 1960s after rebellions struck U.S. cities. Retail outlets began shuttering themselves behind bunker-like armaments, taking on riot-ready fascia, and affronting Black residents in the process. Members of Operation Breadbasket in Chicago rued the construction of new supermarkets—National Tea and Jewel—on the city's South Side. Both were being built without windows. The organization argued that the stores should be picketed to rebuild with windows: "These stores are only built in this manner in the black ghettos" (Operation Breadbasket Staff meeting minutes). Conversely, a South Side business owner who "was suffering from gang troubles" addressed the problem by removing the bars that were installed over the shop windows at least during business hours. His having done so led to a cascade of other local businesses doing the same. "What he appeared to [be] saying symbolically to his community was 'I trust you'" (The Chicago Defender 1973). One corner store (though not liquor) in Philadelphia seen in Fig. 2, offers a diametrically opposed message; it is clad entirely in siding—even the roof—and in stucco where the second floor windows have been blanked out. This impenetrable fortress also sports metal shutters over a window that apparently does not open or is no longer there.

In fact, owners have not necessarily been free to make aesthetic decisions. Institutional policies and practices coerce many liquor store owners to erect barriers over their stores. For example, after civil unrest shook cities such as Newark and Washington, insurers cancelled

Fig. 2 A corner store in East Germantown, Philadelphia. Photo taken August 5, 2019, by author

hundreds of policies in Black neighborhoods, refused to issue new ones (or else at usurious rates), and added riders to those they left intact stipulating that owners must install "safety precautions" such as alarms, security guards, or iron bars on windows. The result is that corner liquor store aesthetics upend the aspirational norms of mainstream advertising, becoming theatrical sites where Black frustrations are reinforced. Carceral aesthetics force Black consumers to assess their lives as divergent from widely disseminated images of alcoholic beverage consumption. Advertising may construct alcohol as sophisticated or seductive, but Black patrons must buy it in highly defended bunkers that may also be dirty and decrepit. If so, any discontent might be solved by buying more liquor.

Dysfunctional community relations

Corner liquor stores instigate antibiosis with Black communities by catalyzing community conflicts. Primary among these are conflicts between communities and the stores themselves. In Chicago, Rothschild's has long had a vexed relationship with its Black neighbors. As a case in point, the chain made the *Chicago Defender*'s front page—indeed half of the entire spread—with the headline "CHICAGO PANTHERS IN LIQUOR BOYCOTT" on October 30, 1968. The Chicago branch of the Black Panther Party had been boycotting Rothschild outlets across the city's South and West sides, seeking redress from a chain it claimed was "the biggest exploiters of black communities." Among the Panthers' demands were the hire of a Black vice president to be screened and selected by the Panthers; the donation of 20 % of the West Side outlet's gross income to child nutrition programs; the deposit of monies to Black banks; and requirements to contribute to the refurbishment of the store grounds and the immediate neighborhood (Fitzgerald 1968). Rothschild's controversies have persisted to the present. In 2010, the very location depicted in Marshall's painting came under attack by area residents who sought to close it down along with other corner liquor stores, citing several concerns including crime (Hutson 2010). The action seems not to have been successful; internet listings suggest that the store is still in operation.

When liquor stores function as social gathering sites, they pit regular customers against residents who wish to rid their neighborhoods of disreputable outlets. In an ironic turn, one Los Angeles senior realized that the burning of liquor stores in the 1992 uprising afforded him mornings free of removing alcoholic beverage litter from his yard and the freedom to walk down the street without fear of harassment by drinkers (Park 1995/1996). On the South Side of Chicago, "one barber shop… had to shut its doors after decade-long regulars refused to walk through the crowds outside of nearby liquor stores" (Maxwell and Immergluck 1997). Quality of life often improves once liquor stores are gone. As noted previously, liquor stores are often spatial foci for disorder, and examples like that in Chicago show that they constitute more than a passing nuisance. Cadillac, who hung out on the 4200 block of Martin Luther King Drive in Chicago, admitted, "I will not sit here with this half-empty bottle of Wild Irish Rose in my hand at 10 A.M. on a Tuesday morning and tell you that what we are doing is totally right… The homeowners say at the meetings with the police that it does not look right, and we believe them" (St. Jean 2007). Residents who objected to this behavior were surely rankled by the disreputable drink Cadillac consumed as much as the time and place he drank because public consumption of fortified wines stains the community with the ignominy of the beverage.

Liquor stores also create competing systems that pit communities against the state. Communities that have organized to contest liquor store operations have found their needs in opposition to state and business interests. Community concerns about the health and social

risks of liquor stores have been weighed against the revenue streams that flow out of Black communities to city government. For example, when D.C. policymakers sought to implement a ban on new liquor stores in saturated neighborhoods, skeptics countered that doing so would jeopardize $35 million in taxes each year (Sanchez 1994). In this way, liquor stores echo environmental justice conceptions of toxic facility siting. In this framing, communities are mined for land, cheap labor, natural resources, and the forced hosting of toxic outputs in order to benefit external elites (Taylor 2014). Corner liquor stores act similarly, serving as a regime of resource extraction for alcoholic beverage companies and government interests.

Because corner liquor stores work in *symbiosis* with the state, they further an antibiotic relationship with communities. These outlets create conditions that invite punitive state actions. Perhaps the most spectacular display has been in the context of urban rebellions, where property destruction—of which liquor stores top the list—prompted the patrol and lethality of military forces. Liquor store relics remained in the rubble and shuttered storefronts of Washington, D.C., in 1968, and as noted earlier, Los Angeles saw the destruction of scores of its liquor stores following the acquittal of LAPD officers indicted for assaulting Rodney King. Corner store liquor had become the dominant symbol of social ills in South Central, and as 10 % of the businesses that were destroyed, their demise clearly reflected residents' anger about these stores (Park 1995/1996). At that time, liquor stores were owned primarily by Korean merchants who had reluctantly taken up a dangerous business that others eschewed, primarily because the profit margin was higher than for other grocery items. They did so despite the stigma and despite the danger inherent in a predominantly cash businesses. Wounded by the profit made off of Black debility and death, community residents further chafed at the fact that several liquor stores were born out of the dissolution of groceries and markets, much like Ida Mae Gladney's experience in Chicago.

More routinely than in urban rebellions, liquor stores invite police sanctions in geographies already cast as reservoirs of criminality. Individuals who engage in minor infractions such as consuming alcohol from open containers, more serious offenders, and those who are not engaged in wrongdoing but who congregate near stores (such as Wiley Green), may be equally ensnared in police stops and other encounters. Liquor stores are busy locations serving numerous cash-carrying, distracted, and potentially incapacitated customers (St. Jean 2007). As places where offenders may linger, they create a spatial focus for both criminal acts and disorder (Theall et al. 2011; St. Jean 2007). If liquor stores give offenders a legitimate reason to loiter, so too do they give police a site to set up an offensive perimeter to control, surveil, and punish. In other words, liquor stores rouse a kind of perpetual game of cops and robbers.

Still, this theater for law enforcement operations is bounded by a great deal of discretion. In Black neighborhoods, the state often turns a face of disinterest to the communities they are meant to protect. Underenforcement, or a weak state response to criminal activity, means that law enforcement will elect not to arrest or pursue certain perpetrators, forcing residents to contend with a lack of protection and emboldened offenders (Natapoff 2006). Underpolicing is but one facet of a broader public service failure in which municipal codes are unregulated and municipal services are scant and poorly implemented. When officials differentially enforce violations, residents and institutional actors come to expect that the resulting conditions are normative (Natapoff 2006). Underenforcement partly underlies liquor store prevalence and intensifies problems such as sales to minors. For that reason, one means by which communities have sought to limit the harms of liquor stores has been to push for more stringent enforcement of existing laws and regulations that are weak in practice (Maxwell and Immergluck 1997).

Additional inputs to a system of antibiosis occur because police encounters, often driven by racial profiling, can induce more consumption of alcohol. An abundant literature has shown both that police encounters are a salient and frequent experience of interpersonally-mediated racism for African Americans and that experiences of racism are associated with alcohol use (Gilbert and Zemore 2016; Lewis, Cogburn and Williams David 2015). Those who develop addictions may then populate either the carceral system or the "people caretaking industry" (Vergara 1997)—the shelters, clinics, and other social services that the state provides in lieu of the resources that would have rendered them unnecessary. Liquor stores may also simply replace the work of the caretaking industry, providing spatially dispersed sites where troubled individuals seek out their own care.

Conclusion

If corner liquor stores purvey their wares to a public that is uninterested in, if not actively opposed to them; if their disproportionate density in Black space is impervious to time, political context or geography; and if that density produces disease, disorder, and death among African Americans, then corner liquor stores are toxic for reasons that extend beyond immediate health risks. It is logical that they have been the target of sustained critique and community action for policy change. The federal government's Task Force on Community Preventive Services issued recommendations in 2009 to limit the prevalence of liquor stores, though it noted the importance of state pre-emption laws, which limit what local governments can do (Campbell et al. 2009). In fact, cities have been able to implement a number of strategies to redress inequities in alcohol exposure. Within the domain of zoning, special limits on liquor stores restrict proximity to sensitive land uses such as schools, churches, public gathering areas, or other liquor stores. Oakland passed such an ordinance, forbidding new licenses in areas where the crime rate was higher than the county average. Baltimore's TransForm Baltimore was a zoning rewrite to reduce alcohol outlet prevalence, the first in more than forty years. It went into effect in June 2017, and among the changes were the ejection of "grandfathered" stores that were non-conforming (e.g., operating in residential areas). It remains to be seen whether these stores will move out and simply reseat themselves in other disadvantaged communities, spreading out the problem rather than eliminating it (Hippensteel et al. 2019).

Other cities, such as Chicago in 1990, attempted to prevent the incursion of new stores and abate the harm caused by existing outlets at a citywide level by making community notification for new licenses mandatory (Maxwell and Immergluck 1997). A stricter action would be to implement moratoriums on new licenses, which Washington, D.C., lawmakers imposed in 1994 (Sanchez 1994). Other large-scale interventions include requiring community economic development plans that consider current liquor store density; special taxing; expanding the scope of community concerns for which stores could lose their licenses (i.e. beyond criminal activity such as narcotics or weapons); and giving financial incentives to liquor stores in order to induce conversion into more desirable retail categories (Maxwell and Immergluck 1997). Los Angeles implemented the last, prompting changes from liquor stores to laundromats (Freudenberg 2014).

These are all creative and necessary strategies to address the oversaturation of liquor stores, but they may elide the racial meanings underlying liquor store density. That is, focusing on zoning and other means by which to curtail an abundance of outlets may not necessarily

address the ways in which corner liquor stores exist in antibiosis with host communities. Without making those processes explicit, even successful spatial interventions leave diffuse impacts uninterrogated. African American activists have pointedly explicated what is at stake—concerns that reach beyond consumption to include such problems as family conflict, community fragmentation and constrained economic growth (Freudenberg 2014). Yet, some community actors have been reluctant to press too far, lest they appear to be prohibitionists. In 1968, when Marion Barry spoke out against the high prevalence of liquor stores, he qualified his statements to the City Council, stating, "I am not against liquor stores. I am not interested in the morals, but at least we ought to control the number..."(U.S. Congress, 1968). Years later, other D.C. activists voiced the same ideas as the public debated the proposed ban on liquor stores in saturated Black neighborhoods. Activists stressed that they were not prohibitionists or trying to make a moral point, just a practical one, that there were too many stores (Sanchez 1994). Also in the early 1990s, Pabst Brewing came under fire for point-of-sale promotions of Olde English that deployed the term "8 ball," slang for a standard street retail unit of cocaine—an eighth of an ounce. Speaking in response to the campaign, David Grant, spokesperson for the Institute on Black Chemical Abuse, stopped short of stating that the products should be banned: "We are not trying to propagate a policy that says no use of alcohol in the African-American community. We are not neo-prohibitionists" (Post-Dispatch 1991).

Why were these activists and leaders so reticent to make moral claims about the institutions that populated their communities? Whether or not a complete prohibition of alcohol was desired, it is telling that these individuals sought above all to dispel any notion that they might have been so motivated. Apart from the peril of appearing to seek the rebirth of a legal climate from an era long past, activists may shy away from alcohol regulation because many Black organizations depend on financial support from alcoholic beverage companies. As an example, RJ Reynolds wrote to the *Washington Post* to contest the idea that outdoor advertising for malt liquor was a blight on Black communities, pointing out that the company provided millions of dollars in funding for outdoor campaigns by the NAACP, United Negro College Fund, and others, and that "the National Urban League cites the outdoor campaign as one of the most innovative forms of support it receives" (Letter to Meg Greenfield 1991).

Perhaps more fundamentally, critiques perceived as prohibitionist are antithetical to a majority insistence on unfettered choice as fundamental to free society. National narratives around free choice make critique of corporate industries un-American, and corporations insist that individuals have the right to choose any product they wish. In response, activists have argued that communities have the right to protect themselves from dangerous and damaging products and marketing messages (Freudenberg 2014). Alcoholic beverage companies seek to frame Black folks initiating self-determined rejection of their products as patronizing: "There is an awful lot of paternalism in complaints that brewers are marketing to blacks and that blacks can't distinguish between the advertising and appropriate behavior. Nobody pays any attention to white suburbanites drinking a whole bunch of white wine" (Manor 1991). Of course, activists have never argued that Black people were incapable of making their own decisions, merely that they did not wish their communities to be blanketed with racist messaging and with products that those retailers withheld from wine-drinking White suburbanites.

Legal claims that make racial subordination the center of injury could be brought to bear against corner liquor stores. For example, *Brown v. Philip Morris, Inc.*, brought on behalf of Black smokers in Pennsylvania was a *civil rights* lawsuit, one that argued that the targeted marketing of menthol cigarettes to African Americans was unconstitutional. Though the case

was dismissed by the United States Court of Appeals in 2001, the arguments brought race to the fore in a way that radically departed from other product liability claims (Lochlann Jain 2003). The plaintiffs' argument could be summarized as follows, "'We were injured by this product not only because it is dangerous, but because we—as a disenfranchised group (already considered a less than human group)—were sold a version of the product that was designed to be both more addictive and more carcinogenic. We have a suffered a great deal for this and we want you (the state) to stop allowing this to happen'" (Lochlann Jain 2003, 316). Much of this argument could apply to corner liquor stores in that Black communities are supplied with stores that occur with disproportionate density, selling merchandise that is higher in alcohol content, and deploying marketing that draws on and perpetuates second-class Black citizenship. That *Brown v. Philip Morris, Inc.* failed illustrates the challenges in identifying race as a boundary-setter around intended buyers, and in demonstrating how social injuries are enacted (Lochlann Jain 2003). Successfully doing so in the service of advancing community health requires radical rethinking of, and interventions against corner liquor stores.

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